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AUTHOR	Brod, Shirley
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ABSTRACT

Twenty-six specific classroom activities or procedures are suggested for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to individual adults or small groups. These activities include notes on use of visual aids, games and other group activities, out-of-class activities, oral and written language exercises, integration of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in each lesson, grammar instruction, accommodating students' need for clarification, vocabulary development, focusing on comprehension, needs assessment, feedback, use of realia, need for review, use of student-generated material, use of Total Physical Response techniques, using students' prior learning, integration of work- related information into lessons, letting the student be the teacher, and keeping students interested. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Technical Assistance for
English Language Training Projects
1997-1998

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ABC's for Tutors: 26 Teaching Tips

by Shirley Brod, Spring Institute for International Studies

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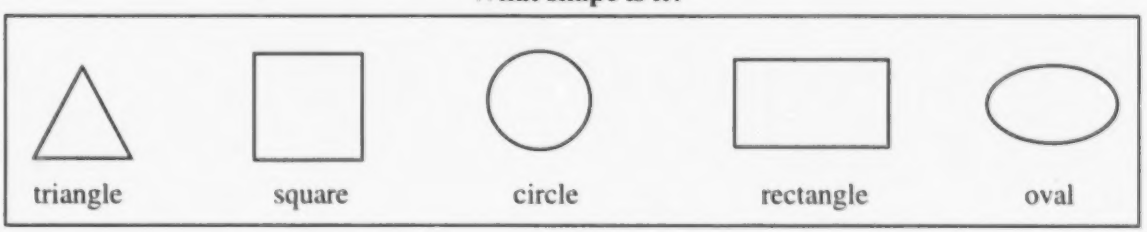
A letter in parentheses in bold type refers to another tip.

1. Attribute Cards

Teach your students words for describing - colors, sizes, shapes, adjective opposites (thick/thin, tall/short, easy/hard), etc. - so they can use these cues to describe objects they want to know the names for. Use pictures to illustrate the concepts to be sure they understand: Page 11 of the 1998 *Oxford Picture Dictionary* is an excellent source. Or make your own picture posters or large index cards (see sample below) and display them for easy reference. Then take turns posing and solving riddles: "It's in this room. It's brown. It's square and made of wood. It has four legs. What is it?" (a chair)

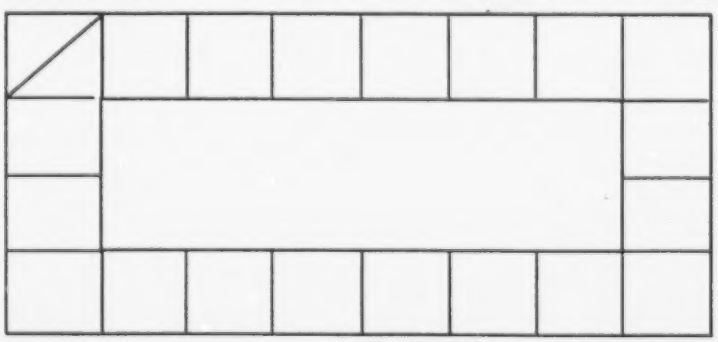
What shape is it?



2. Board Games

For a change of pace, and to give your students extra opportunity to practice any previously-taught vocabulary, use super-simple, enjoyable board games. Draw a set of boxes around the sides of a piece of paper, marking one square as the Start/Finish. For vocabulary review, turn a picture face-down on each square. For sight-word practice, use word cards instead - or use a mixture. Provide a colored paper clip or piece of paper with initials as game pieces for yourself and for each player. Toss a coin - heads, move one square; tails, two. When players land on a square, they turn over the piece of paper and name the object or read the word.

You can make the game harder by requiring that a sentence or a question be made for each item, or the item has to be described (using the attribute words, above, which you've been practicing.)



3. Contact Assignments and Field Trips

After you've taught vocabulary, bring it to life by having students locate the items at a relevant site. You can take students to the grocery store to locate food items they've been studying; they can go to another store on their own and compare prices. Or, if your literacy-level students are learning sight words (especially environmental print, **(E)**: STOP; HOSPITAL; EXIT), have them see how many times they can locate the word before your next session together. If you are teaching worksite English, have them locate such items at work as the fire extinguisher, the first aid kit, the personnel office, etc.

4. Dictation Pairs

Fold a piece of paper in half vertically, labeling one half A and the other B. Then fold it again horizontally. In the top quadrants, number each side. Do the same for the bottom quadrants. Write target vocabulary beside the numbers at the top on the left, then at the bottom on the right. Pairs of students - or you and the student you're tutoring - fold the papers so each can see only one side and take turns dictating the information to each other. With literacy level, this can be as simple as numbers or letters of the alphabet, When finished, the pairs open their papers and check that the two sides match. This is an excellent tool to use when practicing clarification strategies. **(J)**

5. Environmental Print

Students need to know a great many signs which they see around them every day. (Brod and Dunn, 1998, for a list of environmental print sight words from MELT in ELT/TA's Literacy Portfolio.) After you and your student(s) have determined the critical words they need to learn, **(N)** and you have practiced them frequently and given the student(s) word cards to take home for review, have students watch for them in their areas and make a tally of the number of times they can locate each before the next lesson. **(C)**

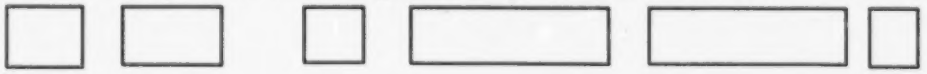
6. Four Skills

Be sure every lesson contains time for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Not only does this give opportunities for students to utilize their most effective learning modes, but it also provides change of pace, allows for review or spiraling of information and vocabulary, and enhances the student's ability to manipulate language.

You can begin a lesson with a listening exercise based on the last session. For example, if you were working with time with beginning level students, read a simple paragraph and have them write any time they hear. You can also have students telephone any number in your area which has recorded information, such a theaters for movie times or libraries for hours of operation. This is a good way to introduce telephone use, as they can listen as many times as they need to in order to grasp the target information. For low-level students , don't require them to do more than write the times. As you know, listening on the telephone is one of the most difficult of listening tasks. Vary the tasks based on the level of your students. Higher-level students can also do this as homework.

7. Grammar through Color-Coded Word Cards

Give real beginners a chance to use deductive reasoning to see how English grammar works - without all the terminology. Using colored markers, write each word in a target sentence on a separate word card. I use green for verbs (they make the sentence "go"), orange for adjectives, blue for pronouns, etc. Let's look at the first words my students read: "My name is _____." When you and the student have practiced this until it comes easily, begin "reading" with six word cards:



My	name	is	_____	_____	.
(blue)	(red)	(green)	(purple)	(yellow)	(black)

(Have the students write their own names if they can. That clarifies what you're doing.)
Point to each card as you "read" the sentence together. After several practices, jumble the words and have students put them in order.

Then move to the related question. Include the question mark, but don't try to teach it:

What	is	your	name	?
(black)	(green)	(blue)	(red)	(black)

When the student can master these two (and it may take an entire lesson!) make cards with *first* (in purple, to match their first name) and *last* (in yellow to match their last name) to the question and answer: What is your first name? My first name is _____. What is your last name? My last name is _____.

8. Have a Bag of Tricks handy: someday you're sure to need them!

We all have carefully planned lessons that fall flat, or days when we and/or our students are tired and sluggish, or times when the lessons are completed early. Carry a few old reliables with you to pull out at such times. They can be board games **(B)**, TPR activities **(T)**, pictures for which your students can make up stories that become reading lessons **(S)**, review sheets **(W)**, or any successful activity or game you have used in the past. Don't hesitate to spiral previously-introduced material.

One easy technique for beginners which requires no additional preparation is to have your students tell you what they remember about a topic from past lessons. For example, ask them to tell you about their families. You write what they tell you, and then you read the story together. **(U)** For the next lesson, you can copy the story and leave blanks which they fill in as you read the story (a good comprehension check.) Students can draw a picture to add to the story, or use a family snapshot. You can add listening to this by telling a similar story about your own family and having students tell you what they heard, asking for clarification for any parts they didn't understand.

For two great, simple sources of inspiration, see my favorite ERIC digests from NCLE and the Center for Applied Linguistics: *Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners*, Holt, 1995; and *Teaching Multilevel Adult ESL Classes*, Shank and Terrill, 1995.

9. Interviews

Do you ask all the questions (or do most of the talking) in your sessions? A good way to give your students practice, too, is to use paired interviews, where you take turns with Q&A. You may want to use personal information questions such as those students are asked at Social Services or in job interviews: What is your Social Security number? What is your address/telephone number/date of birth/marital status, etc. If students have limited literacy, you can use picture cues, such as those in *Basic English for Adult Competency* (Prentice Hall), or simple interviews like *The Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary Literacy Program* (Oxford University Press), or *LifePrints 1*, New Readers Press.

10. "Just a minute! Did you say 15 or 50?"

Don't overlook your students' need to ask for clarification - or to give it when asked. Do lots of practice in the safe confines of your site, so they will be confident with strangers out there in the real world. For good examples, see Sample,1998; Frankel and Meyers, 1992, or **(D)**. Such activities utilize all four skills, as well.

11. Keep Word Lists.

To reinforce phonics painlessly, keep cumulative lists on site of words students have learned. Use a separate flip chart page or piece of paper for each beginning letter, and have students review them frequently. When they have learned a number of words with the same beginning sound, be sure to read the list orally together. Following that, they can listen to a list of words they know, raising their hands when they hear one with the target beginning sound. Alternately, have them identify words which *do not* have the same beginning sound (which is more difficult). Extend the activity by having them add words they can think of which begin with the same letter or sound. (In addition to reinforcing phonics, this activity helps them become aware of their progress in reading and vocabulary acquisition. **(L)**

12. Label the learning.

We hope your students have had a part in deciding what they want to learn **(N)**. It is also critical that students are aware of their progress, especially if their goals are long-term. If you use a competency-based approach (Grognet, 1997 and **O**), you have clear performance objectives for each class. Write them out before the lesson, and return to them at the end to be sure students realize that they have accomplished the goal of the session. Donna Price-Machado (1998) starts each class with an agenda on the board, and ends the class by having students name what they have learned. Keeping a cumulative list of accomplishment can be a real motivator for your students, and help to keep them involved in the long process of learning English.

13. Meaning comes first!

Reading is "to comprehend the meaning of written or printed material." (*American Heritage Dictionary*) It is *not* just word-sounding, any more than memorizing a list of vocabulary items is learning English. Any lesson worthy of the title begins with making sure that students understand what is being presented, rather than assuming that you are "getting through" to them. We all know what most students will answer if we ask, "Do you understand?" ("Yes, Teacher.") Here are some alternative ways of testing for comprehension.

You can tell a story, draw a picture, or act out a situation to introduce vocabulary (Adelson-Goldstein, Shapiro and Weiss, 1998). Students are not required to do more than actively listen (feeding back what they have heard) or answer simple early production questions which allow students to give one word responses: *Do you put the key in the ignition or the carburetor? Is lettuce yellow?*

Students can brainstorm a list of clothing items while you record the items on the board. Working from the list, ask students to stand if they are wearing a particular item. Or use family relationships, and ask them to put up their hands if they are husbands, daughters, etc.

• Total Physical Response (TPR) requires physical action which gives overt proof of understanding, or its lack. **(T)**

14. Needs Assessment

There are two basic types of needs assessment: tests to assess what learners already know, and assessments of what they want to learn or be able to do. Santopietro Weddel and Van Duzer, 1997, tells us that adult learners come to ESL classes for very diverse reasons. They may want to read to their children, pass a driver's test, or get a job. Attrition in literacy classes, especially with real beginners, is all too common. If learners' needs are not met, they are likely to drop out. Helping learners understand where they are, and setting realistic short and long-term goals with measurable outcomes to indicate progress **(O)** can provide the motivation to help them survive the long-term requirements for learning a new language.

15. Outcomes

Most of us were actively studying for twelve years or more. As a rule, adult students of ESL do not have the luxury of such a slow process. What does that mean for us as we design curricula and plan lessons?

If we begin with clear statements of what the student is expected to be able to do at the end of the hour, the week, and the semester, we can 1) stay on track and teach efficiently; 2) show the learner what he can do and present visible proof of his progress; and 3) demonstrate accountability to our programs and/or funding sources. For more information on competency-based learning, see Grognet et. al.,1998. A core curriculum is outlined, assessment tools are discussed, and textbooks based on MELT are listed.

16. Pictures and Realia (real objects)

Maybe you're Michaelangelo reincarnated and can draw any object or illustrate any abstraction for your students without batting an eyelid. Or maybe you're like me, and can only draw inspiration - when you're lucky. I absolutely depend on a source for visual reinforcement of content to rescue me when my students and I venture beyond what can be seen in the classroom. While picture files are old standbys,

they are not easily transportable and unusually incomplete. The most valuable single source I know is a good ELT picture dictionary. (Shapiro and Adelson-Goldstein, 1998.)

It's also helpful to have objects students can hold and manipulate, to appeal to the kinesthetic learner and bring reality to the learning. I've absolutely worn out a very lifelike set of plastic fruit. In addition to using it to teach the names of the fruits themselves, we use it for practicing classroom commands (*Give two oranges to Isobel. Hand me the purple grapes.*); for working with colors, spatial relationships (*Put the yellow apple in the upper left-hand corner of the table.*), puzzles and question formation with attributes (*What's green, oval-shaped, and sour?*); preferences (*Do you like peaches or bananas?*), and umpteen other activities. It's definitely a part of my Bag of Tricks with beginners. **(H)**

17. Question-Forming Exercises

When I started working with beginners, I soon noticed that I spent a lot of time asking them questions without giving them much practice - and, of course, learners of a new language are *filled* with questions, just waiting until they learn how to ask them! Many of you have probably used variations of Jeopardy, the television game, to practice question formation with your learners. For a nice version with *What* and *Who* questions, see Margaret Silver, 1998. It may be useful also to use a categorizing technique, in which students make lists of vocabulary words under such headings as the following: *Where? Who? What? When?* (and *Why?* and *How?* for more advanced learners.)

18. Review: Long/Short-Term and Spiraling

Even Einstein had to review! Don't expect your students to remember everything from any lesson - no matter how well you taught it! And be prepared for them to remember hardly anything from lessons you worked through in the past and did not revisit. This spiraling of learning is especially important for elderly learners, whose short-term memory may not be as sharp as it once was, and for non-readers, who may not be able to re-read past information on their own, or who haven't learned the study skill of reviewing.

You can recycle previously-studied work sheets as review, as homework, or as a respite from talking and listening in a tutorial session. Or spiral old information in new contexts - they've learned to alphabetize; let them make a telephone directory of important names and numbers, or alphabetize the names of grocery items to form a store directory. (Then they can carry it to the market and write down the actual aisle numbers where these items are found **(C)**. You can review old vocabulary with word cards and board games **(B)**. Previously read material can be used for strip stories, in which students arrange cut-apart sentences in the correct chronological order, especially good for directions for locating a place, or instructions for completing a task **(T)**. Once you have a collection of review techniques, use them with new material. It's efficient because students don't have to spend time learning a new technique. (Isn't that a great rationalization for not coming up with new ideas all the time? And it's true!)

19. Student-Generated Material

Don't have a textbook? Have students who speak English but don't read it? Want a way to interact with your students personally and individually? You may be in the market for some of the techniques which are currently finding a niche in ESL methodology. Here are a couple of the most popular: the language-experience approach to literacy, and dialogue journals.

The language-experience approach (LEA) is a whole language approach that promotes reading and writing through the use of personal experiences and oral language. (Taylor, 1992) Students tell you a story - from their own history, of an experience you share together, or what they've learned about a topic in a previous lesson, a description of a picture, etc. You write it as they speak, and the text becomes your reading material. See Taylor for more details and variations. A short, clear description may also be found in the *Minnesota Literacy Council Volunteer Tutor Manual*. A variation which can be used with true beginners may be found on the Journal pages built into each unit of T*he Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary Literacy Program.* (Templin-Imel, 1996)

A dialogue journal is an interactive tool for personal communication between the teacher or tutor and the individual student. In addition to giving a real reason for writing, it allows students to work through

cultural adjustment with a sympathetic reader. Students write about topics that are important to them - perhaps of personal, academic, or work related focus - and the teacher writes a response. For a good discussion, see the guru of dialogue journals, Peyton, 1993. For additional sample materials, see Fitch, 1993.

20. Total Physical Response (TPR)

"This technique is... based on how first languages are learned, focusing on the pre-speaking stage. Command forms are used with real objects and actions. Students respond physically - only adding speech when they are ready." (Minnesota Literacy Council , 1994. The teacher acts out commands as they are being spoken. The visual component insures comprehension, and as students copy the actions of the teacher, their body language reinforces memory. With very early beginners, you can use a few TPR exercises from the first day to teach classroom commands. (*Sit down. Open your books.*) For more advanced students in worksite or pre-employability classes, you can demonstrate the use of a piece of equipment, naming each step as you perform the action - emptying the pencil sharpener is an example using a common classroom item. This is followed by giving the commands without demonstration; student performance is clear indication of comprehension. Then students take turns giving and following the commands until the procedure is mastered. If appropriate, this may be followed by reading and writing activities.

21. Use what the student already knows: elicit before you teach.

Eliciting and using what students already know is an efficient way of teaching and of building student confidence and self-esteem (Templin-Imel, 1996.) Take advantage of the wealth of knowledge and life experiences adults bring to learning. And don't waste their time "teaching" what they already know! That's a sure way to lose the confidence of your students.

The *Crossroads* series of competency-based adult ESL texts (Frankel and Meyers, 1992) begins each topic-based unit, not by having the teacher explain what is to be taught, but by having students answer questions about the opening pictures, honoring what students know and involving them right away in the content . You can do the same thing with your own pictures to introduce the topic of the lesson. You can also have students brainstorm all the words they can think of on a topic, such as home repair tools or sewing equipment, occupations or types of recreation. Many students enjoy this challenge. You can use a picture dictionary, cover the text, and have students name as many items on the page as possible. (It's also a good way to determine the level of interest students have in a topic.)

22. Vanishing - or Appearing! - Letters and Sentences

In order to encourage independent spelling in hesitant learners, first have them copy words from a model. Then give them the word with a gradually increasing number of blanks where they are to supply the letters, until they can write the entire word without the scaffolding. Margaret Silver at the International Institute in St. Louis uses this technique with low-level learners in citizenship classes to spell the most common words they are likely to be asked to write on the citizenship test, words such as *President, legislative, state, and flag*. With more advanced students, you can delete an increasing number of sentences until they can write a passage unaided. You can also use cloze exercises (sentences with blanks where words go) for listening exercises. Then students are responsible for writing only target vocabulary. In order to use the same listening passage at the same time in mixed-level situations, give beginners a script with only a few blanks, more advanced students as many blanks as appropriate.

Hangman is a variation which you probably know, in which a blank for each letter of a word is written. Students try to guess the correct letters; each error adds a part of the hangman figure. The object is to complete the word correctly before the figure is completed.

To stimulate creative use of vocabulary, try chain stories. Give the beginning sentence of a story or passage, one which deals with topics or vocabulary you have been studying. Your students (or you and your student) take turns adding one sentence until the story is complete. This can vary from the old "It was a dark and stormy night" variety to "Boris is looking for a new job."

23. Work-Related Lessons

If your students are unemployed but hopeful, or employed and needing to learn more English, you can focus your lessons on work-related materials and activities. This may concern simple following-directions exercises, or examining the expectations of employers in this culture ("What makes a good worker in America?"). From filling out applications to team building and understanding benefit packages, the potential for relevant material is boundless. For a free sample of several lessons for students at different levels, contact Spring Institute and ask for the SCANS Plans Portfolio.

24. X marks comprehension.

How do you test for comprehension, especially with low-level students? The simplest of comprehension questions is a multiple choice format where students put an X or a check beside the correct answer. Obviously, the chances for lucky guesses are strong, and the opportunity to use critical thinking is usually minimal.

Adult beginners with limited English are not beginning *thinkers*! They can, and do, solve problems, organize projects, work with budgets, and survive in the adult world. Challenge them with activities requiring minimal reading ability but not minimal thinking ability.

One way is through the creative use of visuals. If you have been working with giving directions, have a set of unsequenced pictures which students number or arrange as they listen to you read. Or have them check the item which is (or, to make it harder, *isn't*) mentioned on a shopping list. These same activities can be used with words or sentences for more advanced learners.

With a little imagination, even matching activities can provide more mental exercise. Instead of having students match a picture of an employee with the name of the occupation (a perfectly good vocabulary check), check their understanding of the job by having them match the name of the occupation instead with pictures or names of the tools or equipment the worker would use. (See Templin-Imel, 1996, p. 217.)

Categorizing is another type of activity which can require active processing of information. This can be as simple as having learners sort word cards (or, for non-readers, picture cards) into those which belong together, such as fruits vs. vegetables; or as complex as selecting subjects they need to study if they want to be engineers. Or from furniture they have in their living rooms to equipment they would need to build a new deck. Or perhaps they're compiling a list of items they can buy if they have a very limited budget. In sorting analogy cards, you may wish to accept any grouping of similar items or identification of different ones, provided students can give a good explanation. Some guessing may still take place in all of this (after all, learning to guess intelligently is a study skill!), but if the mind is more actively engaged in a task-based activity, the learning will occur faster and more effectively.

25. You're the Teacher: Role Reversal

One of the hard parts of working with a single student or a small group is providing ample opportunities for student-initiated activities. One way to do this is to change roles, letting the student teach you - with your support for any language gaps. Learners may demonstrate preparation of a favorite ethnic recipe, describe a special place from their homeland, or contrast their job in their native country with the job they want to get, or currently have. If the student is not literate in English, you can transcribe what the student says and use it as the basis for reading activities. **(S)**

Students can select topics or vocabulary to study **(N)**, be callers in Bingo, or be responsible for classroom tasks - erasing the blackboards, emptying the pencil sharpener, storing materials. (Price-Machado, 1998) Learners need to know that, no matter who the teacher or what the material, the ultimate responsibility for learning is *theirs*. All of these factors can help to motivate learners and contribute to student self-esteem. (Brod, 1995.)

26. ZZZ Use change of pace to keep your student(s) interested and involved.

As you know, many adults come to our classes after busy days and complex responsibilities at work or at home. They also bring a wide diversity of learning modes and styles. And we know that a low anxiety level in the classroom is key to student participation in their own learning process. (Grognet, 1997). By varying the approaches we use and the materials we employ, by remembering to include activities that are pleasurable and have a good opportunity for success while still challenging the learner, we're doing our part to help our students reach their goals - and to enjoy the journey.

(For additional information for using these simple activities in your classroom, or for sample handouts, contact Spring Institute.)

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E L T COORDINATES

Mail: Burna Dunn
Spring Institute
1610 Emerson Street
Denver, CO 80218

Phone: (303) 863-0188

Fax: (303) 863-0178

E-Mail: elt@csn.net or springinst@earthlink.net

Web Page: http://www.springinstitute.com